



State of the Art

# Women and New Media in the Margins of the Sri Lankan State

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Sarala Emmanuel and Sachini Perera  
Sri Lanka

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The **Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society** (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Six research partners from Sri Lanka, Philippines, China, Thailand/Taiwan, Bangladesh and India are studying various aspects of the terrain. Also three eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan and Thailand, are writing think pieces delving into the research subject from their perspectives to further enrich the research process.

The **State of the Art** is an analysis of the current state of the field researched. It includes a literature review, based on the hypothesis developed in the research proposal.

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## **Background**

### **1. Sri Lanka: Context**

Sri Lanka presents itself as a country in South Asia that has high 'social development' indicators; both girls and boys have access to free education provided by the state from primary to university level; an extensive network of health services across the country ensures that the majority of its population have access to basic health care. In the context of the ethnic conflict, many areas in the North and East were often without continuous access to these services. With an end to the war, it is expected that access to services and resources and the development dividend will be universally available.

The distribution of women within key economic, social and political spheres, however, indicate that there is a clear difference in men and women's access to resources and to avenues of decision making. This constrains the full realisation of women's rights, whether in the South or in the conflict affected North and East. For example, in 2009, the estimate population of Sri Lanka was 20.2 million of which almost 52% was female. Out of a total labour force of 8.1 million, 2.9 million or 34.3% was female. Given that the current definitions of 'work' and of 'economically active' exclude housework done primarily by women in the home, only 36% of women in the labour force are deemed to be economically active while approximately 64% are categorised as economically inactive (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). Further, the unemployment rate is double for women (4.4 for men and 8.6 for women). Significantly, educated unemployment is recorded to be higher among women compared to men (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). Data on women's participation and representation in the political arena and the high prevalence of structural and social violence against women, for example, place Sri Lanka's 'achievements' in a critical perspective and belie international measurement of women's empowerment such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG Goal 3) (UNECOSOC, 2010).

Sri Lankan women continue to face challenges in relation to ensuring State compliance with international treaties and conventions such as the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination on Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). An outcome of almost three decades of war has significantly changed household and family structures with an unprecedented increase in the number of female headed households to approximately 24% of the population. Such changes together with the demographic structure of the country, which has an ageing population and where 52% of the population are women, signal an urgent need to address the concerns of women across age groups.

The fast changing economic, social and cultural environment also highlights the changing perceptions and articulations of social norms relating to sexuality in general and to gender and sexual identities in particular. The emergence of women as decision makers at the level of the single parent household together with women's visibility in the wider socio-economic

arenas provide a platform to examine and relate these new identities and relationships towards furthering dialogue and debate on facilitating better policy and particularly practice for women's rights in the country.

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) remain marginalised in access to mainstream media in general, and in relation to the expression of critical perspectives on socio-economic and political aspects of women's lives and on gender based differences. At the same time, new media is opening up avenues that are being keenly grasped, especially by the younger generation. New media is allowing for explorations in mass communications in terms of content as well as form. Most exciting in this field is the increasing interest in using new media among women's organisations both in urban and non urban areas, in the South as well as in the North and the East. This lends itself to aspects of technological skills development as well as in the development of novel perspectives by women for advocacy on women's rights. However, New Media in itself brings out the complexities of who can or who does use it, for what purpose is it used and where does access and use increase or be subject to monitoring and control.

## **2. ICTs access and use in Sri Lanka**

According to Gurumurthy and Singh (2010) information technologies create and expand public domains and create a means for asserting identities and group rights, particularly placing women's interests in the centre. However, enabling structural change and political will become crucial to bringing about transformation in experiences of women's citizenship. They refer to examples of grassroots women using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to claim their livelihoods rights – such as the experiences of SEWA in India.

Globally it has been the case that women's involvement in technology development and use has been very low. For example in the USA 38%, Brazil 25%, China 7%, and Arab states 1%. Therefore, even though there is great potential in ICTs, other social and cultural dimensions play a role in women's ability to exercise their rights in this domain. A study done by Hafkin (2005) found that female internet usage is higher in countries that are more gender equal, countries in which human development indicators are high and countries which are high in technological development. It was also observed that there is correlation between the Gender Empowerment Index and female internet users. New ICTs have also provided new employment opportunities for women, however this has been highly problematic in terms of women's exploitation and increased vulnerabilities in these new arenas of work (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2006).

In Sri Lanka there have been several studies regarding the access to and use of ICTs. The study done by Jayaweera *et al.* in 2006 noted that more young women than men tended to use Internet cafes. Women usually accessed the Internet from work. Around a quarter of the respondents accessed the Internet in their homes. A larger percentage of users accessed educational material, followed by general information and entertainment. However,

awareness about services such as email and Internet was high only among Colombo affluent and middle class parents and parents in Jaffna district. Tele shops and cyber cafes were rare in the rural environment. Tele shop services were used by 30% men and 19% women (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2006).

A more recent national study done by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in 2009 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009 December), noted that in the period 2004-2009, computer ownership within households had increased in all the provinces. On average, 1 in every 10 households owned a computer. However, the majority of computers were owned in the urban sector (23.6%), with only 3.1% of computer ownership in the rural sectors of Sri Lanka. In terms of usage of Internet and e-mail, the study indicated that only 13% of the population had used internet in the previous 12 months and only 12% of the population had used e-mail in the previous 12 months. There was no gender breakdown of this usage in the study.

The DCS study also noted that 44% of the population were computer aware. It was clear that there was a positive correlation between educational attainment, English literacy and computer literacy. In terms of computer literacy, the study noted that there was a 25% increase at the national level; however the lowest increase was in the Eastern Province where part of our study will be conducted. There was a higher literacy among men (22%) as compared with women (19%). One other interesting finding of this survey was that there was high computer literacy among unemployed youth between ages 15-29 waiting to enter into the labour market.

### **3. The infrastructure and institutional frameworks of ICTs**

According to the study by Jayaweera *et al.* (2006) the e-Sri Lanka programme which led to the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector and service provision, multiple stake holder participation and growth of funding, has yielded positive results. Internet usage, education programmes, business transactions, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in policy making and electronic factories in free trade zones are all on the increase; however, the use of ICTs in poverty alleviation and the health sector continued to be low.

The institutional and legal frameworks put in place by the Sri Lankan government come under the Sri Lanka Telecommunication Act no. 25 (1991)<sup>1</sup> and Amendment (1996)<sup>2</sup>, Information and Communication Technology Act No. 27 (2003)<sup>3</sup> and Electronic Transactions Act No. 19 of 2006<sup>4</sup>. In terms of information infrastructure the growth in mobile phone usage has exceeded that of fixed line use: 4.2 million compared to 1.5 million in June 2006. In 2006

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1991Y0V0C25A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1991Y0V0C25A&hword=) Retrieved on 4 March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Available at [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1996Y0V0C27A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1996Y0V0C27A&hword=) Retrieved on 4 March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Available at [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2003Y0V0C27A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2003Y0V0C27A&hword=) Retrieved on 4 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Available at [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2006Y0V0C19A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2006Y0V0C19A&hword=) Retrieved on 4 March 2011.

the number is Internet Service Providers (ISPs) was 27, but 60% of the market was controlled by one ISP (Jayaweera *et al*, 2006).

As support for a comprehensive approach to the promotion of ICTs at the national level, a number of key institutional mechanisms have been set up by the successive governments in Sri Lanka. One key structure is the Sri Lanka Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) which issued a draft policy in 2002 recognising the need to create opportunities for citizens to participate in the global economy by creating conditions for e-commerce, information and education and to communicate with the government through ICTs. The e-Sri Lanka programme initiated in 2002 was the first comprehensive plan for development of ICTs in Sri Lanka. It identified ICTs as the key tool with which to promote economic growth and national integration. The five components of the programme (Jayaweera *et al*, 2006) were as follows:

Programme 1: Build implementation capacity by increasing the capacity of the government to implement the programme, through partnerships and policy development.

Programme 2: Build national information infrastructure and enabling environment.

Programme 3: Develop ICT human resources.

Programme 4: E-government: Delivering citizen services through models of accountability, transparency and client-focused services.

Programme 5: Use ICT as key lever for economic and social development by developing content targeting economic growth, increasing connectivity and the use of mass media for dissemination of information.

The government, entrepreneurs and users have been identified as key stakeholders, with international organisations playing a major role as financiers. A government web portal<sup>5</sup> provides information on government institutions, ministries, departments and other relevant bodies from a single access point, in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Basic information, activities and government forms are accessible through this site. However, at this stage there was no recognition of promoting ICTs as a social transformation structure for rural or poor communities. The policy was drafted in gender neutral terms. This initiative to promote the use of ICTs for development does include empowerment of women, but they are included with youth, reflecting the underlying insensitivity to the gendered differences in access to ICTs in general. Ideally, a gender analysis needs to be integrated in the overall processes that lead to the adoption of key policy initiatives; however, this does not appear to have taken place. There has also not been much articulation of the strategic use of ICTs for the empowerment of women by national policies and bodies that have targeted women.

In the educational sector, ten universities including the Open University have targeted programmes in the field of ICTs that produce graduates in the engineering, electronics and computer fields. In the last few years they have expanded the enrolment process to meet the

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<sup>5</sup> Available at : [www.gov.lk](http://www.gov.lk), Retrieved on 9 March 2011.



demand for information professionals. The government has also set up a national network of over 100 telecentres and affiliated facilities in universities and community locations to reach remote areas, for a distance education modernisation project which has been funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Jayaweera *et al*, 2006).

New ICTs were introduced to women's groups in the late 90s. Most of the urban-based NGOs have since computerised their operations and have Internet access. Limitations to access and use do exist in terms of geographical location and available infrastructure, as well as high costs and lack of access to adequate funding which are barriers to the extensive use of IT in the organisations. Most of these NGOs use software for word processing and accounting. Very few use computers for data processing, maintaining databases or desktop publishing. E-mail use is more for international correspondence than local.

#### **4. *Sarvodaya Nenasala***

One of the efforts taken by NGOs to use ICTs for social transformation and community development has been the Telecentre Family Project of *Sarvodaya* (Sarvodaya-Fusion, 2009). In this programme a 1000 telecentres (*Nenasala*) were initiated around Sri Lanka to encourage community participation – specifically targeting youth, children and farmers. The telecentres were to focus on telemedicine, e-commerce, e-governance, etc. Mediums used to create awareness were provincial forums and brainstorming sessions, use of a social networking site<sup>6</sup> and blogging. However, infrequent participation online due to lack of being internet savvy was mentioned in passing as a short coming.

According to an Impact Assessment Study of the Telecentre Family Project done in 2009 (Sarvodaya-Fusion, 2009), the programme has not specifically targeted women or consciously included women in their ICT skills development programmes. In terms of the social impact in the village communities, the study noted that it was mostly children and youth who were utilising the telecentres, with 7488 children using the centres as compared to 406 farmers. In terms of usage of the centres – the average number of visitors per week at a telecentre was 25. This assessment did not provide a gender breakdown of users. One objective of our study is also to carry out interviews with the *Nenasala* project to learn about the process through which it engages women (if it does) and if this engagement has transformed women's experiences of citizenship as defined by this research project. As this research is based on action research methodologies, we will also engage with the *Nenasala* in terms of both components of the research project – i.e. the national component and the Batticaloa component.

#### **5. *Women working with and in media***

The current study is situated in a larger global context where the emergence of digital networked ICT has revolutionised the way people communicate and interact in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There has been widespread recognition that this has altered the way people engage

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<sup>6</sup> For more information see: <http://telecentrefamily.ning.com/>, 9 March 2011.

on social, economic and political issues at both national and global level, in ways that appear radically different from their engagement through conventional media.

It is evident that this 'new media' has been widely embraced as instrument of positive change. The emergence of Web 2.0 has created a space for interactive information sharing, user controlled content, hosted on platforms that are easy to operate, cost-effective and with few apparent limitations. The potency of these new tools for communication and information exchange is only now being recognised and realised by civil society institutions in Sri Lanka.

## **6. The Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka.**

Formed in 1984 by a group of Sri Lankan feminists interested in exploring ideological and practical issues concerning women in Sri Lanka, the Women and Media Collective (WMC) is motivated by the vision of creating a just society that does not discriminate on the basis of gender. With this in mind WMC aims to bring about change based on feminist principles, for a society free from violence and militarisation, which would pave the way for a balanced representation of women in decision making and governance, and advocate for non-discriminatory laws and policies.

The organisation's work was structured under thematic areas that included 'Legal and Policy Reform', 'Advocacy for Social Cohesion' and 'Women in Politics and Media'. It undertook to advance its goal for an equal society through dissemination of knowledge, policy debates, advocacy, mobilisation, publications and networking.

WMC celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009 as a feminist women's organisation committed to building and strengthening the women's movement in Sri Lanka. At different moments in time the work carried out by the organisation has resulted in political change, state reform, the inclusion of women and gender concerns in the peace process, increased state recognition of women's rights, the enactment of new legislation or legislative reform promoting and protecting women's rights and recognition for the need to increase women's representation in politics.

By engaging with policy formulation WMC has been able to contribute to the formulation of the National Women's Charter, the National Action Plans for Women and in 2009 engaged in the process of formulating policy on migrant rights and contributed to the National Action Plan on Human Rights. It also spearheaded the campaign which resulted in the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, 2005. WMC has also engaged in policy discussions related to women's land right, single women and female heads of household, peace making and peace building, media reforms among others. WMC has stepped forward in responding to natural and man made catastrophes in Sri Lanka by providing gender sensitive and rights based analysis and action. The organisations networks range from grassroots level local women's organisations to national level actors who have a direct voice in policy formulation. Thus, WMC has acted as a bridge that closes the gap between high level policy making and the marginalised in the work for women's rights.

WMCs success in the past 25 years was only possible through the commitment of its closely knit and highly dedicated staff. The organisation continues to carry on its work under the leadership of Kumudini Samuel, Sepali Kottegoda and with Sunila Abeysekera as a Consultant Advisor together with the support of a distinguished Advisory Board. High grassroots level activism, effective networking and a strong political base could be identified as factors which contributed to the success of WMC's efforts to change the situation of Sri Lankan women in a positive and progressive manner.

WMC has itself come to recognise critically the value of new media for its own areas of work. As a thematic area it looks to using new media as a key platform for disseminating feminist ideology and creating new spaces for feminist discussions and debate. Creating an online space for WMC's voice to be heard is seen as a way to pave the way for WMC's future growth and as an important channel for engaging with the younger generation of women.

It is, however, necessary that as we embrace the promise of new media, we are not unrealistic about what its limitations may be as a transformative force. For instance, in Sri Lanka, women have limited access to the range of new media available, especially amongst women in families living under 100 dollars a day. A recent study by LIRNEasia (2005) found that only approximately 12% of poor women owned a mobile phone. In addition, women's access to mobile phones in Sri Lanka, it has been found, is largely mediated by men. However, it is clear that rural/poor women often use other people's phones, which may belong to friends, neighbours or other family members. The LIRNEasia study notes that only 1.2% of the population has access to the internet. Although access is set to rise, these realities raise significant questions about the expectations of what new media might facilitate in terms of social transformation for women at the margins of society and the state. It is for this reason that we wish to study the impacts of two specific newly started initiatives to use new media tools as a means to empower women in relation to their rights as citizens of Sri Lanka.

## **7. Importance of the study**

Women's engagement with new media has not been adequately documented in Sri Lanka. This is clearly an 'emerging' area of knowledge in Sri Lanka both in terms of access to and use of technology by women. From a feminist social sciences perspective, there is equally a need for an exploration of the understanding and practice of citizenship as articulated by women using new media. WMC is interested in carrying out such a study. The study will help to reveal the possibilities for challenges to women's practice of citizenship in Sri Lanka, and the potential for new media to be effectively utilised in promoting and enabling women's full participation as citizens. This is an important dimension to document, especially in the context of challenges that women have faced in becoming visible in mainstream political discourses through mainstream media.

It is envisaged that the information and learning from the research process will feed into the interventions that are being studied so that it can shape and guide the interventions to be more effective. At the end of the process, the research findings will fill an important gap in feminist

research in terms of exploring women's engagement with citizenship through new media. The research findings will also help guide the future work of women's organisations on how to effectively engage with new technologies to bring about social change.

## **8. Theoretical framework**

To analyse the material from this aspect of study, we will draw on concepts of inclusive citizenship (Kabeer, 2005), multiple dimensions of marginality, and on feminist articulations of the information society, public space and the public sphere.

The concept of 'citizenship' is an integral part of 'modern' democratic constitutional frameworks. It recognises non-discrimination on the basis of particular characteristics of persons or societal formations, i.e. women, men, sex, gender, language, religion, etc. Through these, citizenship is articulated as a form of identity of an individual which 'allows' for recognition of certain rights of that person. The identity is established through, for example, a national identity card, a passport, etc. Such documentation or lack of, clearly demarcates the lines along which an individual is deemed to be entitled to or be denied certain rights within that polity.

## **9. Conceptualising 'women's' citizenship**

Citizenship of women is framed through various cultural practices within social relationships and others at an ideological level. It points to the ways in which the intersection of power is defined or framed in being a citizen. The discourse on citizenship is akin to the discourse of gender; gender is the recognition of *social attributes that underlie identities* between males and females that designate them as women and men. These social identities recognise capacities, skills, sexual orientation on the basis of 'accepted' social norms and practices. Hence the concept of 'gender' is often conflated with that of women. The concept of 'woman' is also often presented as signifying a single identity, that of 'a woman' and not as a signifier of many identities.

Just as the conceptualising of citizenship itself is often articulated within a universalising language of rights, much of advocacy for women's rights, certainly in South Asia, is biased towards presenting a single dynamic view of a universalised identity of woman (this becomes clear when we look at the formulation of legal interventions. See below). One can draw more parallels to this approach in the way in which the family is defined in mainstream development discourse as a unit based on the assumption of 'equal' access to resources and power. Fundamentally, the mainstream development discourse (examine the major Poverty Alleviation programmes in South Asia) of the household denies the differences in relations of power within the household, between women and men. Such a definition denies, for example, the fact that ethnicity or class, or caste can be a key denominator in the access of family based households to resources whether in terms of paid employment or State benefits.

Feminist scholarship has been very sharply critical of such approaches. For example, there is the argument that women are a part of a construct of dual identity: that of female and male. Simon de Beauvoir was one of the early advocates on the politics of this dual identity. Writers such as Mouffe (1992) and Menon (2004) among others carries this argument further by showing that in fact the category of woman itself is problematic. There is no one definition of women just like there is no one definition of men; there are instead multiple identities (Menon, 2004).

Arguing the need to move away from such an essentialist framework, Mouffe highlights the fact that:

‘(...)for those feminists who are committed to a radical democratic politics, the deconstruction of essential identities should be seen as the necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the variety of social relations where the principles of liberty and equality should apply. It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself, and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions that we are in a position to theorise the multiplicity of relations of subordination’ (Mouffe, 1992: 371-372).

Kabeer (2005) notes citizenship to be a highly contested concept where individuals or groups may find their experiences determined by factors such as ethnicity, gender, caste, or region.

## **10. Exercising women’s citizenship**

An aspect that is important in an examination of women and citizenship, is to look at the ways in which women practice citizenship and how they are ‘allowed’ to practice citizenship. These can be seen in the ways in which the legal frameworks and interventions position women as citizens and the manner in which these interventions frame the ways in which women are able to practice citizenship. A second aspect would be the ways in which the notion of citizenship provides for the engagement of women and men in the mainstream political arena. The dynamism within the political arena is constituted by the ideological practices which give different valuations of power in the way men and women exercise and are allowed to exercise citizenship.

### *A) Legal dimensions*

The legal aspects of women’s citizenship is most apparent in the way that laws function differently for women and men, particularly in upholding and protecting women’s rights as citizens. Furthermore, the legal dimension can provide or inhibit the space in which women can practice citizenship. Some of these issues are examined more closely in Menon (2004) and Sunder Rajan (2003), who have discussed these aspects in terms of political participation and legal interventions.

Menon raises the issue of advocacy for legal reform by women’s movement, arguing that ‘the goals (of feminist campaigns for legal interventions for women’s rights) are to redress the discriminatory nature of particular laws, to create new laws in areas of ‘judicial void’, that is, in the ‘private’ realm of the family’.

She also brings up the issue that despite successes in India such as the implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act (1984) and the Commission on Sati (Prevention) Act (1987), there is little effective implementation of these reforms and poses the question ‘...why did the implementation of these laws remain conservative and partial?’ Her analysis raises the question of how far campaigns for legal reform can in fact strengthen a broader understanding of women’s citizenship and rights, in the lack of an effective public discourse.

Sunder Rajan (2003) too elaborates on the debates that have and still continue to take place in India in the context of religious identities as a signifier of community identity. She does this in relation to the Shah Bano case which in effect resulted in the State overriding legal interventions that called for the exercise of responsibility of a husband towards his divorced wife. The State in this case, bowing to a strong patriarchal Muslim religious lobby, deemed that a Muslim divorced husband is not required to support a destitute ex-wife (which was the cultural practice) and that either the community or the state should take over this function.

These two examples indicate how legal intervention constrain and shape the exercise of women’s citizenship, and that the gendered singular category of identity for women affects how they are able to practice citizenship as well as how they may be ‘allowed’ to practice citizenship.

## **11. Women’s citizenship in Sri Lanka: Some issues**

This section will give a brief picture of the development of Sri Lanka's information society, particularly in relation to women's engagement with it. We will explore the history of feminist engagement with media in relation to articulating women's citizenship rights in Sri Lanka.

## **12. Ideological valuation**

There is a difference in the valuation given to the political and social roles of persons categorised as women as compared to the valuation of roles given to men, which are not only socially, politically and economically diverse but also typically possess more power. This results not only in a greater sense of power among men but also affords an unequal access to power for women. There are differences of power in these relations.

Michelle Barrett argues that women are mainly positioned as engaged in household work and value of their wage work is diminished or overlooked. The socialist feminists’ argument that the limitations of women’s participation in wage labour is related to familial ideology wage bargaining rests mostly on definitions of skill. This incorporates the assumption that women’s wages are secondary because of the ascription of the destiny of ‘wife and mother’ to all women.

In Sri Lanka, one of the apparent ways in which contestations of the multiple identities of women is in their role as income earners especially as overseas migrant workers and their role as mothers and wives. There is very little acknowledgement given of migrant workers’ status as wage earners; the focus tends to be negatively on their role as mothers and wives.

The exercise of equal citizenship by these women as migrant workers are often constrained and sometimes actively inhibited through the power relations in which the women are embedded.

This brings us to the very specific aspect of the exercise of power in the practice of citizenship by women. Social or legal constraints in exercising power results in the subordination of women and limits their practice as citizens. Here citizenship is taken as the exercise of power by women within the private and public spheres. We need to look at how citizenship defines women. Ethnicity to some degree is defined by and defines citizenship. The manner of citizenship that is practised by women is often also guided by various cultural associations.

This is one of the best ways of describing the influence of ethnicity and culture.

### **13. Different meanings of citizenship in different contexts**

Comparing the conflict affected as well as post-tsunami contexts with the challenges of women's political representation and participation in Sri Lanka, it is possible to identify the different meanings held by a concept such as citizenship, and especially as it is applicable in women's lives.

#### *A) In the context of the conflict and the 2004 tsunami*

An examination of conflict as well as post-tsunami humanitarian and development efforts reveal important considerations for the understanding of women and citizenship. The engagement of women as combatants during the military phase of the conflict brought forth a striking break from the established 'mainstream' images of women as wives and homemakers (De Mel, 2001). From the very experience of the tsunami itself, survival issues and to post-tsunami rehabilitation impacts, the impact of everyday gendered identities on men and women were visible.

More women than men died in the tsunami, the reasons ranging from the possession (or lack thereof) of basic skills such as climbing trees and swimming to main concerns such as more women staying back to look after, look for or carry children. Women survivors of the tsunami reported incidents of rape and sexual violence in the immediate aftermath.

Women's needs and concerns were often not the priority concerns in the initial responses of the state and most agencies. Women's organisations had to actively pursue that serious consideration would be given to women's concerns in the planning and implementation of humanitarian aid. Where women were articulate and challenged discriminatory practices, they were subject to threat and intimidation. The form of citizenship in such a context has very different meanings then from that in relation to political participation; however both involve the active practice of citizenship and an engagement in women's rights and representation.

These issues are part of the discourse on citizenship in the broadest sense.

*B) In the context of political representation*

Thambiah (2000), along with other writers, points to the dichotomy inherent in the recognition of women as citizens with 'equal' rights to engage in mainstream political activities including holding office, and the challenges in this process that require special policy interventions to facilitate the process towards achieving such equality. An important area of the exercise of power as discussed before is in the arena of political participation.

Sri Lanka is marked by its high social indicators but at the same time, possesses very low numbers of women holding office in any of the formal political structures. Because citizenship is also used to denote the political participation, representation and engagement exercised by men and women as citizens of a country, the denial by parliamentarians of the need to enact special laws or provisions to facilitate significant representation of women in mainstream politics stem from an ideological bias that deny women's enjoyment of their citizenship rights.



## Specific objectives and research questions

### 1. Objective of the research:

To study how new media is transforming citizenship practices of women currently in the margins of political and civic life in Sri Lanka.

### 2. Research questions:

- Does new media provide a transformative platform for women to exercise their citizenship rights in Sri Lanka?
- Does new media enable women to renegotiate citizenship rights in their local contexts – such as access to resources, information, decision making bodies?
- Does new media enable women to contribute to discourses on formal citizenship at local and national levels? How does new media engage with and feed into (and *vice versa*) main stream media in terms of discourses on women and formal citizenship?

### 3. Policy focus of the research:

This research will provide useful information on the effectiveness of advocacy strategies, campaigns and access to information strategies that are being used by women's organisations working on women and citizenship issues, particularly those strategies which are based on the use of new media. This research will provide critical insights into the effectiveness of certain strategies and hopes to discover new learnings on how to improve the work of women's organisations and networks in Sri Lanka. We hope to inform both policies related to access to information, as well as those related to increasing women's political participation and citizenship rights. However, these are tentative policy implications and more concrete policy directions can only be identified with the analysis of the research findings.

The study will explore women's engagement with two initiatives utilising new media. The two initiatives function at multiple levels:

### 4. At the local level

- A) *Creating women's news from the margins – engaging in the public sphere as active citizens*

Suriya Women's Development Centre (SWDC) has been using various traditional as well as alternative media over the past ten years to enable women to exercise their citizenship rights. This engagement with media has included alternative theatre, audio material, newsletters, journals, campaign leaflets and engagement with mainstream media - television programmes, radio and newspapers. SWDC also has strong local networks with over 26 women's organisations and women's groups in the conflict-affected Batticaloa district. Through the women's networks we have developed over the years informal means of communication and sharing information to enable women to exercise their rights. The most recent example of this

is the mobilisation that was made possible to support women to give their testimonies to the Presidential Commission on Reconciliation and Lessons Learnt which took place in the first week of October in Batticaloa. Hundreds of women came to give testimonies on disappearances and killings during the war.

*Minmini News* (Firefly News – the local name of the Our Media Ourselves idea) is a rural women's news network in Batticaloa. This aspect of the study will document how rural women engage with new media, the transformative potential of new media in terms of access to services and information, informing discourses on governance and citizenship and active engagement with local level decision making bodies. This aspect of the study will also document the real challenges that women face in both engaging with new media as well as socio-cultural challenges in terms of becoming active in public space and reflect on the potentials new media provide to overcome some of these challenges.

Women's activism in Batticaloa has been in the context of a prolonged armed conflict and militarisation. This research will therefore study how new media has been used and has become useful for their work on women's citizenship. Women in Batticaloa face a double form of exclusion from traditional media. On the one hand, the content is determined by patriarchal corporate perspectives from the capital city that do not either reflect or engage with the lives of women other than casting them as consumers. The other is that regional voices are rarely included, with regional issues being dealt with either through the eyes of reporters and editors in the capital city, if and when they appear at all. The idea was to try to generate news and information content that was relevant to women in provincial settings, like Batticaloa, and drawing the content from the circumstances in their lives. We already had considerable information, as women's networks, but this was rarely shared broadly with women in a way that could increase their awareness and engagement of issues facing other women in the same area.

This intervention is a turning point through which to view social transformation in several dimensions. The dimensions that will be explored at the local level are:

- Creation of knowledge and access to knowledge by women - Are women accessing knowledge created through *Minmini News*?
- Internal transformations of women in terms of their opinions about socio-political events, their capacities to make judgements and choices – Are women voicing an opinion on news and events and becoming active agents using new media?
- Active engagement with socio-political structures and spaces - Are women taking actions in exercising their citizenship rights due to the information gained through the women's news network?
- Transformation of women's relationships with each other – Is the intervention creating a new kind of social collective?

- Transformation of women's relationship to technology – Is the intervention transforming women's use and engagement with new media?

Currently *Minmini News* has been set up using Frontline SMS software and has been running as a closed network for its test phase. The planning phase of the *Minmini News* took some time as key women activists had to be consulted on the important issues around ethical content and security. During the subsequent test phase, 15 women have been involved in working with a 5-member editorial team to pilot and evolve the processes and procedures for *Minmini News* functioning. At this stage we are involved in solving practical problems, in terms of generating and disseminating news at the local level. As part of the research, we have been documenting the process through which *Minmini News* has been set up, along with its links to existing contextual realities – such as the current floods in the district and local election coming up in March. The debates around content, understanding of women's citizenship rights, right to create news, etc. have so far been a rich source of material for the research process. Secondly, documentation of the real challenges around women using and engaging with new media tools is also being done and this too has been an interesting process of learning.

## 5. At the national level

The second initiative is the use of new media in a campaign to raise awareness about the importance of women in political participation. *Accessing information from the margins* focuses on the *use* of new media by women and the *impact* of new media on women.

This aspect of the study will look at the way in which women engage with issues such as the representation of women in national decision making processes, for example, via increasing the representation of women in the political arena. The Women and Media Collective is set to launch a media campaign aimed at raising awareness on the importance of increasing women's participation and representation in mainstream politics, focussing initially on Local Government Institutions. This study will follow the evolution of this campaign and the mode of implementation of the campaign. This research will look at these issues within the operations of the campaign in a selected district, namely Badulla (Uva Province). The objective is to see whether and how women engage with such initiatives and how women utilise such avenues as a means of exercising their rights in areas they consider most relevant and meaningful.

The new media campaign<sup>7</sup> will profile women candidates through a website which will have written material as well as video and audio clips. There will be news feeds into the site from the district level campaigning and activism. There will be engagement of the new media initiatives with the mainstream media instruments as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Available at <http://srilankawomeninpolitics.blogspot.com/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

So far, WMC has been following the progress of this new media campaign and analysing the statistics. Since the blog statistics are not gender based, a questionnaire will be posted to generate gender based data.

WMC has also been following Sinhala blogs, which are rapidly growing, on a variety of subjects. We are currently in the process of contacting Sinhala bloggers in order to interview them, particularly those from the Badulla district where our target group is located. Some of the sites being followed include Sinhala Bloggers Union<sup>8</sup>, November Movement<sup>9</sup>, *Vikalpa*<sup>10</sup>, *Boondi*<sup>11</sup>, *Kottu*<sup>12</sup> and *Amba Gaha Yata*<sup>13</sup>. This is an exciting and pioneering exercise in that such interventions using new media are in themselves a very new and emerging occupation, particularly among young persons.

We will explore facilities and networks of the initiative of the *Sarvodaya* Movement in setting up and operationalising *Nenasala* at village level in Sri Lanka to ascertain a profile on the gendered nature of access to information and training in and through New Media, as a sounding board to examine our own research objectives. At present, given that *Sarvodaya* data on the users of these facilities are not gender disaggregated (*Sarvodaya*- Fusion, 2009), this will be as an initial step of the research process.

This aspect of the research will have three components:

- Learning agenda - documentation of process of those designing and running the website in terms of how decisions are made, the process of moderation and how the initiative evolves based on the context, and the relationships it has with other media as well as women
- New media impact - discussions and engagement with women who are generating the content
- Design level component into the website which engages with independent users/visitors through a random survey component

This study will therefore provide valuable baseline information on women's access to these new media platforms and a background to the population who engages with these tools through taking readings of the use of the new media initiatives at different points of time and different points in the process.

This aspect of the study will also attempt to understand how new media interacts with mainstream media in terms of political discourse – including community media initiatives, local radio and national media. This study will document if and how new media provides a platform for women to shape political discourse in the country as well as influence policy.

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<sup>8</sup> Available at <http://www.sinhalabloggers.com/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://novembermovement.wordpress.com/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Available at <http://vikalpa.org/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Available at <http://boondionline.blogspot.com/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Available at <http://kottu.org/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Available at <http://ambagaha.blogspot.com/> Retrieved on 9 March 2011.

## **6. Methodology**

### *A) Action research*

This study will be using feminist research methodologies of action research – linking the research process to actual practice. It will engage with two local initiatives (OMO and the WMC new media campaign) from their inception, and document the process of women using new media. The research process will also dialogue with women consuming and engaging with the process through interviews and focus group discussions. As action research articulates there will be no distance between the researcher and the subject – it will be a close dialogue between the research team and the new media initiatives each feeding into the other. The interviews with women will attempt to document the impact on new media in terms of the research questions mentioned above. This process will be the forum through which the mid-term feedback workshop would be conducted.

Given this specific background context OMO has begun (mid 2010) as a small experimental effort, with locally generated funds. It has been in a testing phase – trying out technology and the human systems required; using Frontline SMS to send out news or information collated from a test phase sources of approximately 15 women engaged with community issues; and, developing the editorial systems and checks at present. Hence it has not yet been operational beyond the test group of approximately 30 people. It uses the Roman script to communicate Tamil language content, since unicode is not universally used yet. We will be further developing this process, as the process of getting the technology working for us has been more challenging than we had anticipated.

In terms of the WMC campaign, this research process will have three learning encounters. One within one month of the setting up of the new media initiative, then the second point would be three months into the process and the final engagement would be six months into the process. At each of these points, there will be focus group as well as individual interviews with the women who are generating content (e.g. women standing for local government offices and women's groups working on citizenship).

The website is currently attracting traffic through Sri Lankan blog aggregators, Facebook updates, etc. It was launched in September 2010 and will continue to be updated until the local government elections are held, most likely in early 2011. It is mainly written in Sinhala but includes posts in Tamil language as well.

The interactions with mainstream media are twofold. One is through newspaper articles, radio and television talk shows, etc. These have been in Sinhala mostly, but some have also been shared in Tamil and English. The other method is the promotion of the campaign through newspaper and television advertisements, posters, banners, radio jingles, etc. The advertising campaign has been divided into several segments, the first being the period leading up to the introduction of the Local Government Election Amendment Bill, in October 2010. The next segments of advertisements will be launched during the call for nominations expected around November/December 2010 and then in the period leading up to the election.

### B) *Base line survey*

Both the initiatives will have a survey component built into the intervention. Currently we are exploring the different technical options on how this can be done. The research team will contact the target group at the early stages of the research in relation to the key questions discussed above and then re-interview the same target group after a period of time to assess the impact of the intervention.

### C) *Secondary source survey*

The research will also monitor the impact that the new media initiatives have on mainstream media (through monitoring web based impact, newspaper and visual media reporting). We will also monitor the interactions of this blog with other new media such as other Sinhala blogs, Facebook, Groundviews and new media counterparts of mainstream media. Further, we will monitor if these two initiatives intersect or interact with the *Nenasala* (i.e. the telecentres having Internet access at village level) in the relevant districts.

## 7. **Final policy level advocacy forum**

Once the research is completed, the research report will be used to create awareness among women's organisations on the impact of new media in their lobbying and advocacy work, and will use the findings to discuss future policy level interventions of women's organisations working in Sri Lanka.

## 8. **Outputs**

- Research report dissemination
- Lobbying and advocacy
- Sharing of report with women's organisations and policy makers
- Presenting findings at seminars and other spaces
- Lobby for these at policy making levels

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